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Washington Ponders Yurchenko: A Troubled Spy or an Actor?

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 9 — Vitaly S. Yurchenko's voice was breaking and he appeared to be brushing tears from his eyes this week as he described for reporters what he said were his experiences during three months in the hands of the Central Intelligence Agency.

"When I was sleeping, they prohibited me even to close the door," he said. "Door should be closed, and next room was sitting such fat quiet, stupid — excuse me — unemotional person who is following the order. Only following the order."

Mr. Yurchenko's rambling performance at the news conference this week may have been the finale in a elaborate play staged from the start by Soviet intelligence. Or it was a remarkable public display of the inner turmoil of a middle-aged man, a spy spurned by his lover and torn by guilt over betraying his homeland.

No one in Washington is sure which explanation is the truth, and members of Congress and knowledgeable Administration officials are divided over how to interpret the evidence.

U.S. Denies Mistreatment

The State Department has called Mr. Yurchenko's charges against the C.I.A. "completely false," and members of Congress including Senator Dave Durenberger, chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, have denied the C.I.A. mistreated him.

C.I.A. officials now have begun to review everything they were told by Mr. Yurchenko. The agency hopes its efforts to verify leads he provided will establish that he was a legitimate defector who changed his mind. Agency officials believe the evidence available so far supports this view.

But the doubts within the Administration reach as high as President Reagan, who last week said that Mr. Yurchenko's revelations were of little value. The entire affair, Mr. Reagan suggested, may have been part of Soviet ploy to disrupt the summit scheduled for later this month.

The case is likely to have far-reach-

ing consequences for the C.I.A., whose operational procedures are under scrutiny in Congress and within the Administration. Until now, the criticism of William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, has focused on covert operations such as the mining of the Contra harbor in Nicaragua.

For the first time, it is Mr. Casey's performance as this country's chief spy master that is being called into question by members of Congress and the Administration. Administration officials and members of Congress are troubled by the Yurchenko case and by the agency's handling of Edward Lee Howard, a former C.I.A. officer who Mr. Yurchenko said had helped Soviet intelligence identify a valuable American agent who was a weapons researcher in Moscow.

Members of Congress want to know why Mr. Howard was forced to resign while he still knew sensitive information. And some are asking why Mr. Yurchenko was allowed to dine with only one companion last Saturday at a restaurant just a short distance from the Soviet embassy compound on Tuna Road.

'Some Tough Questions'

"All this has cost the agency," said one senior Administration official. "And they're going to have to answer some tough questions."

"Either a mistake was made in getting into this situation or a colossal mistake was made in not spotting a double agent," said Senator Patrick Leahy, the Vermont Democrat who is Vice Chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence.

On Friday, in an unusual public statement, the agency appeared to be trying to blunt some of the criticism and to show the Russians that Mr. Yurchenko had given away extensive inside information about the K.G.B. The agency's three-page biography of Mr. Yurchenko mentioned the strains in his marriage and said he was a "general designate" of the K.G.B., responsible for a variety of spying operations in North America and Canada.

As senior intelligence officers, members of Congress and experts in the

field begin to assess central issue of Mr. Yurchenko's bona fides, several themes have begun to emerge.

A Classic Pattern

Those who support the theory that Mr. Yurchenko changed his mind under the stress of defecting say his case appears to have followed a classic pattern.

Current and former intelligence officers said that virtually all the defectors to the United States — from senior intelligence operatives to merchant seamen — have suffered severe emotional strain that prompts them to seriously consider returning to their homeland.

"We get an awful lot of defectors," said one official, "and some of them go back." Only last year, Oleg Bitov, a Soviet journalist who defected in 1983, returned to the Soviet Union and attacked the Western nations in which he had lived. Mr. Yurchenko cryptically referred to that case at his press conference, saying, "I read on the newspapers about Bitov. I don't know," but adding: "But I can understand him exactly."

Some former officials familiar with the C.I.A.'s handling of defectors say the Yurchenko case is part of pattern of insensitivity that has surfaced in other instances.

Donald Jameson, a retired C.I.A. official who dealt with defectors and has remained close to many of them since his retirement in 1973, said: "This has long been one of the least adequate elements of the agency. The willingness and the ability to do the right thing has been lacking."

'The Emotional Content'

Many have questioned whether a senior K.G.B. official such as Mr. Yurchenko would be willing to return to his homeland after defection, knowing that he was likely to face a court-martial and a lifetime of disgrace.

Mr. Jameson responded, "One should not underestimate the emotional content of state security officers." He said a Soviet intelligence officer he had once worked with defected because an East German woman who was his lover had told au-

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thorities about his Swiss bank accounts.

Nonetheless, this spy went back into East Germany to rescue the woman who had turned him in. "He walked into a trap, and I think he knew it, but he couldn't help himself," Mr. Jameson said.

Mr. Jameson, who has remained close to defectors since his retirement, asserts that the agency has often not paid enough attention to their precarious psychological state. "I cannot think of a defector who has not, however briefly, come to the conclusion that the only thing to do was go back and make restitution."

Love Affair Cited

Mr. Yurchenko, according to American officials, had hoped to continue his longtime love affair with the wife of a Soviet diplomat who lives in Canada. In September, American authorities drove him to Ottawa where, by their normal signals, a face-to-face meeting was arranged, according to officials in Washington and Canada. The woman spurned him, officials say, and Mr. Yurchenko appeared to grow depressed and less cooperative after that trip.

When an intelligence officer defects, the C.I.A. assembles a team of officials to conduct interviews and analyze the information gleaned. One senior intelligence officer noted that defectors usually arrive prepared to tell a set story.

After this initial phase, the interviewers begin to investigate more deeply, asking the defector to reveal things he would prefer to keep secret. It is at this point, the official said, that the homesickness, guilt, and emotional stress often reach their peak.

Ladislav Bittman, a Czech intelligence officer who defected in 1968, recalls that his experiences with the

C.I.A. were mixed: Some officials were sensitive but others did not seem attuned to the cultural shock suffered by an Eastern European plunged into American society.

Of his debriefing, he said: "Basically it was done on a professional level and not much attention is paid to the psy-

chological stress of the individual. This is an extremely important issue because the defector is going through the most dramatic trauma of his life. He has given up his home, his values, his country. He is like a defenseless child trying to find a new life."

The most important piece of evidence that argues against Mr. Yurchenko being a genuine defector would be what some officials say is the "ambiguous" importance of the information he has provided.

Senator William S. Cohen, a Maine Republican who was one of several senators who doubted Mr. Yurchenko's bona fides, notes that much of the information that has been publicly revealed was historical in nature. Mr. Howard, the former C.I.A. officer, was a "spent agent" in the parlance of the intelligence trade, and Mr. Yurchenko's help in identifying him has largely served to cause turmoil in the C.I.A. Additionally, he is said to have explained the death of Nicholas Shadrin, an American double agent who disappeared in Vienna in 1973.

'Historical' Information

A White House official said it was the "historical" nature of these revelations that had led him to downplay Mr. Yurchenko's value.

The C.I.A. contends that the remaining information, which has not been leaked to the public, will establish his bona fides. But Administration officials outside the C.I.A. who have reviewed the whole body of statements taken from Mr. Yurchenko are said to remain undecided about whether he was a genuine defector.

One official questioned whether the Russians would risk a live press conference with a man supposedly cracking from emotional stress without some very good reason to believe he would follow the prepared propaganda line.

Senator Malcolm Wallop, a Wyoming Republican who doubted Mr. Yurchenko from the first, said the C.I.A.'s Deputy Director, John McMahon, told him several weeks ago: "I'd stake my career on Yurchenko's bona fides."

But a White House official remarked: "The jury is still out."

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